

Which Way To Paradise?

An Abraham Noonan Novel

By Terry DeMarco

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For

Asher, Gwendolyn, Natalie,
Logan, and Autumn

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FORWARD

By Terry DeMarco

Six years ago I got an email from my friend Marie MacDonald. At that time Marie was a teacher at Goodwin Elementary School. She taught her students the finer points of Information Technology. In the email, she asked if I would be interested in speaking at her school for Career Day. For a moment I wondered what career she wanted me to talk about. Was I supposed to discuss IT? I had many years of experience in the technology area, but I really wasn't working in IT at the time. I was doing volunteer work and trying my hand at writing books. Wait a minute, I thought. Writing books... *that's* what she wanted me to talk about! She wanted me to give the kids at her school some insight as to what it's like to be an author.

My first attempt at writing a book hit the literary world the year before. It was a rhyming children's book entitled *The Strange World of Kal E. Kalzoo*. The

book was more a labor of love than an actual writing project. It gave me an opportunity to collaborate with my son Tony, who did the illustrations while I wrote the verses. Together we produced a colorfully illustrated, uplifting little story of a young man trying to find his way home from a not too frightening but very, very strange place.

After writing the children's book, I decided to stretch myself a bit and took on the job of writing a novel. When Marie contacted me, I had just finished publishing my first novel, *The Quantum Passageway*. I decided to take her up on her offer. However, as the date for Career Day got closer, I fell into an old nasty habit. I started overthinking things.

I had given speeches before, but never in front of a group of impressionable children. What if I said the wrong thing? What if I froze and couldn't think of anything to say at all? What did I really know about being a writer anyway? The more I thought about it, the more terrified I became. The last thing I wanted to do was to turn these kids off on the idea of someday becoming authors themselves.

So I did what any writer worth his salt would do... I wrote. The speech I wrote was slightly longer than *War and Peace*. I was going to make sure I didn't miss a thing. I was ready to cover everything from cave drawings to James Patterson; and if I froze, I had a boxful of my books to start giving away. Finally, the big day came. I summoned up my courage and

headed for the school.

When I got there I met the other Career Day speakers. I felt like I was 10 years old and someone accidentally seated me at the adult table. There were soldiers, policemen, and fire fighters all talking about the exciting experiences they've had. There were doctors and forensic scientists. There was even a pastry chef! These were people with fascinating careers. And they all looked very professional. The military and first responders were all decked out in their respective uniforms; the doctors and scientists wore their lab coats. Even the pastry chef was in uniform. She dressed all in white and wore one of those tall, puffy Chef Boyardee hats. As for me, I was wearing blue jeans, a gray taxi driver cap, and a black t-shirt with the word WRITER written in big white letters on the front. Before I saw the cavalcade of professionals, I was kind of proud of my outfit. The hat was similar to the one Kal E. Kalzoo wears and I had the t-shirt custom made. It cost me \$10.95 at an online discount t-shirt site.

I decided the whole experience had suddenly become something I just had to somehow muddle through. How was I supposed to compete with those people? They fought battles, caught bad guys, saved lives, and made delicious cannoli. All I did was tell stories. I felt dejected as I walked into the empty classroom where, in a few minutes, I would give my "awe inspiring" speech on what it's like to be a writer.

I didn't have to wait long. The school bell rang and the kids started filing in from the hallway. Some of them were playing with the surgical gloves handed out by the doctor. I decided if any of them came in with a hunk of éclair from the pastry chef, I'd trade my hat for it.

When the bell rang again, the kids were all seated quietly. They looked at me expectantly as I stood before them at the front of the classroom holding a giant stack of papers. I suddenly felt a great deal of respect for the teachers who stood on that very spot day after day and made this whole molding of young minds thing look easy.

I looked down at the ream of paper I held in my hand. Then I looked up at my audience. I tossed my speech on the heavy, old school (no pun intended) hardwood desk. I took a few steps toward the waiting spectators and introduced myself. I asked them who they had seen so far and what they thought of them. We talked for a few minutes about the other Career Day speakers.

"Those people are all very smart and very good at what they do," I said. "And they all have one thing in common. Do you know what that is?"

I received a variety head shakes, uh-uh's, and blank stares.

"They read," I said. "They read to learn new things. They read to make sure they remember the things they learned before. And they also read to relax

and be entertained. That's where people like me come in. We are the writers; the suppliers of information and entertainment. Imagine if all the people you see here today at Career Day had to learn all their skills by word of mouth. When I was a kid we used to play a game. We would stand in a line and the person at one end of the line would whisper a message in the next person's ear. Then that person would whisper the message to the next person and so on. When the message reached the person at the other end of the line, it would be totally different from the message the first person whispered. You wouldn't want your doctor to get information that way, would you? The message may start out with 'trim his toe nails' and end up with 'remove his spleen.'"

I talked to them about how each and every one of them was already a writer. Every time they wrote a text message, sent an email, or turned in a homework assignment, they were communicating their thoughts and feelings, passing along knowledge, or explaining what they had learned. The rest of the day flew by as every 30 minutes one group of kids was replaced with another. I regretted not bringing enough books for everyone, but we played Bingo in every session and the winners got the book of their choice. I put a few books aside to donate to the school library and told the kids they could check them out and read them if they wanted to.

When Marie invited me back the next year I saw

some familiar faces in the classroom. Some of the kids from the prior year had come back to listen to me again. I talked about being a writer and also about working for Bernie's Book Bank, a not profit organization that gives away books to children whose parents do not have the money to buy them. I also made the kids a promise. Some of them had read my earlier books and were wondering about the next one. I told them I would write a ghost story and call it *The Ghost of Goodwin Elementary*. I started doing some research, but I couldn't come up with a story line that did not closely resemble Harry Potter. I ended up writing *Angels Don't Wear Armani* instead.

I have often thought about my experience at Goodwin Elementary and always felt bad that I did not keep my promise to those kids. I have since committed to making *Angels Don't Wear Armani* a series. This book, *Which Way To Paradise? An Abraham Noonan Novel*, is the second in that series. However, I did devote Chapters 5 and 6 of this book to telling the story of the Ghost of Goodwin Elementary.

I don't know if any of the children I spoke to will read this book or even remember me or my promise. I don't know if I inspired any of them to become the next Dr. Seuss or Ernest Hemingway, but I'd like them to know that whether or not I inspired them, they most definitely inspired me.

- Terry DeMarco

CHAPTER ONE

She glanced at the clock on the wall. It was midnight. The rhythmic ticking of the clock set the tempo as her fingers tapped the keys on her computer. Her face shone with an eerie glow in the dim light. Green and red figures reflected off her glasses when she checked the monitor, looking for signs of distress in any of her human charges. She couldn't shake the feeling that something was going to happen tonight... something bad. She felt like someone was going to die.

She took off her glasses and carefully placed them on the desk next to her keyboard. She rubbed her eyes and then she stretched in her chair until she felt her back click into place. She replaced the glasses

on her face and rose from the chair. It was time for her to make her rounds.

Her name is Monica. She is the night nurse on the tenth floor of Mercy Hospital. The patients were all asleep in their beds; either naturally or sedated. The quiet melody of the patients' monitors pinging from their rooms was eerily soothing. Monica knew that as long as those pings drifted into the hallway, all was right with the world. At least, all was right with her world, which at this moment consisted of the tenth floor of Mercy Hospital.

Monica had been a nurse on the night shift for the past twelve years. The night shift was usually quiet and peaceful and nobody died, at least not while she was there. It was inevitable, of course that sooner or later somebody would die. Monica knew that at some point the soft pinging in one of the rooms would be replaced by a long mournful beep. She envisioned herself moving quickly to the room and assessing the situation as she alerted the doctor on call.

"Doctor," she would say calmly. "This is Nurse Monica; there is a patient in room 1056 who needs your help."

She would then cradle the phone on her shoulder and give him her assessment quickly and professionally. At the same time, she would perform whatever treatment was appropriate to keep the patient alive until the doctor arrived.

The doctor would suddenly rush in and take charge. She would step back and follow the doctor's orders immediately, efficiently, and without question. She would wipe the sweat off his brow as he worked desperately to save the patient's life at all costs. She would watch him bravely fighting to bring the patient back from the brink of death. Sadly, the monitor would not yield even a single ping.

Eventually, she would put her hand on his shoulder and say to him as gently as she could that the patient was gone. She knew he did everything he could. She would rub his sagging shoulders as he hung his head in dismay. She would pretend she didn't hear the little sob as he rubbed his eyes and said, "Call it, Monica." He would call her Monica. And she would softly announce the time of death. She would thank him as he silently headed toward the door; steadied himself against the doorframe; and staggered into the hallway and out of sight. She would give him one last admiring look and then turn to attend to the unfortunate patient.

At least that's the way she envisioned it. And she had a lot of time to think about things like that because working the night shift was incredibly boring. She walked up and down the same hallway, night after night, listening to that stupid pinging all night long for twelve years. She wished something, ANYTHING, would happen to bring some kind of excitement to the job. The one time she thought someone was flat-

lining; she rushed into the room only to find that the patient was sleeping peacefully. She had turned on her side and disconnected one of the contacts on her heart monitor. Well, it wasn't quite as exciting as someone dying, but at least it was something. She did regret not having the opportunity to call the doctor and live out her fantasy, but she is a nurse after all and it's her job to keep people from dying. She reconnected the wire and decided better luck next time.

On the one hand, I felt sorry for Monica. She was bored and yearned for excitement. On the other hand, it was kind of morbid fantasizing about people dying just so you can have a little stimulation in your life. On the other hand, she was a nurse and a good person and she would never do anything to hurt a patient. Wait, I think I used too many hands.

Anyway, I just wanted to let you know that Monica doesn't become a serial killer so that she can win the attention of the doctor on call. Just in case you were worried that she was, you know, unstable or something. In fact, this story isn't about Monica at all. It's about me. My name is Abraham Noonan. I'm an angel. It's OK if you don't believe in angels. We don't take it personally. We'll help you whether you believe in us or not. To be honest, I didn't believe in angels myself until I took a good hard look at my life (after I died that is). It took a slight adjustment of the universe to make me see that angels were always

around trying to soften a blow or nudge people in the right direction.

I used to be an investment manager. How did an investment manager become an angel? Well, that's a long story. I'll tell you about it sometime. Suffice to say, I made a lot of money, drove fancy cars, wore expensive Armani suits and hurt a lot of people. I was lucky, though. I met an archangel named Azrael. I call him Al for short. He gave me the opportunity to make things right; which I did. As a reward, he trained me to be an angel. Personally, I think he made me an angel because he didn't know what else to do with me. Again, it's a long story. I do miss my Armani suits, though. Al keeps telling me angels don't wear Armani. They have to blend in with the crowd and fancy, expensive suits stand out too much. It's better to wear blue jeans, a t-shirt, and sneakers (which is exactly what I'm wearing right now).

I usually keep my dark hair short and neatly combed. When I was alive I took a great deal of care shaving and grooming. There would not be a hair out of place or a stray whisker hiding under my chin. Now, all I have to do is to think about how I want to look and BAM, there it is. I kind of missed all the primping, but then I realized when I thought about my hair being long, it grew out like a chia pet. If I wanted it pink, it was pink. One time I grew a rainbow colored beard and asked Al what he thought

of it. He told me. I haven't grown a rainbow colored beard since.

Appearances aside, another duty an angel has is to make sure a good soul gets to his reward and a soul on the edge gets one last chance to repent. You'd be amazed at the colorful language some folks have used to reject that opportunity. I think if people actually knew the consequences of that decision, they would think twice about repenting. Unfortunately, the rules are clear. Souls need to repent because they truly feel remorse about the things they've done, not because they fear the alternative. Of course there are some souls so dark not even an angel can save them. We don't even get the chance. Those souls bought an express ticket to the underworld long before they passed away.

Anyway, back to Monica. Tonight was the night she would get her wish... sort of. It started with a scream. The scream was followed immediately by the crash. Or maybe the crash came first and then the scream. It's kind of hard to tell since they were so close together. Anyway, there was a loud crashing and screaming noise that shattered the quiet during the night shift on the tenth floor of Mercy Hospital. Monica turned and ran down the hall in the direction of the commotion. On the way she heard that low mournful beep coming from room 1032.

This is it, she thought. It wasn't exactly the way she pictured it, but someone was going to die. She

was sure of it. She pulled her hospital issued cell phone out of her pocket and speed dialed the doctor on call. She knew the drill. She had gone over it in her mind again and again. She would rush into the room and quickly assess the situation. The doctor on call would answer just as she finished her evaluation and she would fill him in as to the patient's condition.

As it turned out, she was a little too quick on the speed dial and the doctor was a little too quick picking up the call. He was on the phone asking her what was wrong even before she got to the room. She picked up speed. She needed to assess the situation fast and let the doctor know what was happening.

"Room 1032," she gasped into the phone, nearly out of breath.

"Nurse," said the doctor, "what's happening in room 1032?"

This was not going according to script. She had to compose herself. She turned the corner and flew into the room like a wide receiver heading for the goal line.

"Doctor, this is Nurse Maaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa..."

She didn't get the "onica" part out because it was hard to talk while she was sliding through a puddle of applesauce, cranberry juice, and numerous other food items that had spilled on the floor when the food tray crashed against the wall. Her glasses tumbled off her face and the cell phone flew out of her hand. She slid across the floor like she was sliding into home plate.

But instead of a cloud of dust, she left a wake of applesauce, cranberry juice, mac and cheese, and orange Jell-O. The phone sailed across the room in a perfect arc and conked the orderly squarely on the head.

It was unusual that a patient would be getting food at this hour. He had been brought in earlier that evening suffering from a heart attack. The doctor placed a food order for him late in the day and this was the first opportunity the staff had to feed him. The kitchen was closed, so the orderly brought a tray full of applesauce, cranberry juice, microwaved mac and cheese and Jell-O.

The patient was a thin, wiry, balding, fifty-something man who spent most of his life in seclusion because he was paranoid about, well, practically everything. He had accused the orderly of trying to feed him poisoned applesauce. First he called her a name. Then she called him a name. She told him he had to eat, doctor's orders. He told her what she could do with her applesauce. She decided she would force feed him the applesauce. That was a bad idea. He knocked the tray out of her hand. She screamed as it hit the wall. Then he jumped out of bed, disconnecting all the heart monitor cables. She bent over to clean up the mess; he clutched his chest and had a heart attack.

Monica awkwardly struggled to get to her feet. In the process, she knocked over a vase of flowers with

a card that read, “Get well soon, take your medicine, listen to your doctor, and close your eyes when getting x-rayed so you don’t go blind. Your Loving Mother.”

She made her way to the fallen patient to check for signs of life. He had no pulse, no breath, and his eyes were wide open and empty. He was most definitely dead. She turned her attention to the orderly who was sitting on the floor moaning with her hands on her head. Monica slipped and slid her way through the mess of foodstuff which had been joined by water, broken glass, thorny roses and a soggy get well card. She opened a drawer of medical supplies and retrieved a cold pack. She squeezed it and shook it. The chemicals inside mixed together to chill the pack to a soothing cool temperature. She took a step toward the orderly and heard the unmistakable crunch of designer glasses underfoot.

The doctor had finally made his way across the hospital and up to the tenth floor. He shot out of the elevator like a sprinter pushing off the starting block. He skidded to a stop in the doorway of room 1032. He peered in and saw Nurse Monica and the orderly sitting on the floor. Monica had a glob of applesauce clinging to her face. Her nurse’s uniform was covered with mac and cheese, rose petals, and bits of orange Jell-O. Her hair was drenched in cranberry juice.

With one hand she was holding her glasses (which were now missing the right earpiece and the

left lens) to her face. With the other hand she was pressing a cold pack to the orderly's head which sported a nasty looking purplish lump. The room looked like a school cafeteria after a food fight. And the patient, one Mr. Melvin Moody, lay sprawled on the floor, his hand still clutching his chest.

The doctor was wide-eyed. "What on earth happened here?" he demanded.

Nurse Monica looked at the doctor and then at Mr. Moody. She directed the orderly to continue to hold the cold pack on her head. She stood up and straightened her glasses on her face as best she could. She brushed some of the mac and cheese off her uniform, wiped the glob of applesauce off her face, and moved her cranberry juiced hair out of her eyes. She walked over to the doctor who was staring at her incredulously. She bent over, picked up a broken rose, and handed it to him.

"Doctor," she said, "you did the best you could. He's dead. Call it."

Then, without another word, she turned and left the room. She limped back to her desk, sat down in front of her computer, and proceeded to write a letter of resignation. The doctor looked at the orderly. She shrugged and winced as the movement made her head throb. The doctor placed the flower on the counter and carefully made his way to Mr. Moody. He bent down and checked for signs of life. There were none. He shook his head. Then he straightened up and

pulled out his own hospital issued cell phone to call for help processing Mr. Moody's remains. After finishing the call he walked over to the orderly, skillfully avoiding the obstacle course of food, cups, plates, broken flowers, and silverware. He helped her up off the floor and led her out the door to find a more suitable place to tend to her wound.

CHAPTER TWO

“So what, you’re just going to leave him there? What kind of hospital is this where you leave the patients lying on the floor? Hey! I’m talking to you!”

The man’s complaints fell on deaf ears as the doctor and orderly left the room without acknowledging him.

“This is crazy!” he said. “This room looks like it was hit by a tornado.”

“It’s all right, Melvin,” I said as I came up from behind and put my hand on his shoulder, “someone will be by soon to take care of him.”

He whirled around and brushed my hand away.

“And who are you?” he asked suspiciously.

“My name is Abraham,” I said.

“Do you work here, Abraham? Because this is unacceptable. Someone needs to complain to the person in charge.”

Melvin was clearly upset that this poor unfortunate man had been left alone sprawled unceremoniously on the floor surrounded by applesauce, mac and cheese and cranberry juice. He was also clearly unaware that the unfortunate man was him. It’s not unusual for a person to die without realizing he’s dead. He just keeps going on as if everything were normal until someone breaks the news to him. That’s where I come in.

“Uh... Melvin,” I said.

“Yeah?” he said still staring at his body.

“I’m sorry to have to tell you this, but you’re dead.”

I find the direct approach usually works best. It’s kind of like ripping off a bandage. You have to do it quick. Of course, if you have a lot of hair under that bandage, it could be a little painful. He stared at me.

“What do you mean I’m dead? I’m right here talking to you aren’t I? How could I be dead?”

“You should probably take a closer look at the man on the floor,” I suggested.

He gulped and pointed at the body while still staring at me.

“Him?” he asked.

“Yeah,” I said tentatively.

“You mean that’s... that’s...,”

He pointed to his chest and mouthed the word, “me”.

I nodded.

He looked at his body and then back at me.

“This is a joke right? That’s just some dummy made up to look like me.”

“No, Melvin, the dummy is you.”

He stared at me and I realized how that sounded. I tried to make amends.

“I mean, you are the dummy.”

I didn’t think I was doing a really good job of getting my point across. I tried one more time.

“What I’m trying to say is that the person on the floor is your earthly remains. Your soul left your body at the time of death. What you are now is your soul free of your body. Do you understand?”

“I’m dead,” he said.

“Yes.”

“And that’s my body,” he said pointing at the man on the floor.

“That’s your body, yes.”

“And this is not a joke?”

Every time a new soul asks me that question I wonder if there really is someone out there with such a morbid sense of humor that he would try to convince a person he’s dead just for laughs.

“No, Melvin, it’s not a joke.”

“Why did they leave me there like that?” he asked, gesturing to the body that lay in the middle of the floor with cranberry juice staining his gown.

“It’s complicated,” I said. “Someone will be along in a minute or two to take care of your body. I promise.”

He turned suddenly and looked me in the eye.

“Who *are* you?” he asked.

“I’m Abraham.”

“I know you’re Abraham. I mean... are you dead, too?”

“Well, actually, I’m an angel.”

“You’re an angel?”

“Yes.”

He took a minute to let that sink in.

“If you’re an angel,” he said, “where were you when that orderly was trying to poison me?”

“The hospital food isn’t great, but I wouldn’t call it poison.”

“I’m dead aren’t I?”

“Not from an overdose of applesauce. You died of a heart attack. That’s why you were here in the first place.”

He gave me an appraising look. Then he looked down at his body sprawled on the floor.

“At least he could have closed my eyes or something before he left me laying there like a sack of potatoes.”

“Here,” I said. I bent down and passed my hand over his eyes. They closed with a flutter. “Is that better?”

“Yes. Thank you.”

He stood there dressed in his hospital gown staring at his body on the floor. I gave him a minute to process what was happening before I urged him on.

“OK, Melvin, it’s time to go.”

“Go? Go where?”

“To Paradise, you’ve earned it.”

“Paradise? You mean like Heaven?”

“Yes, exactly like Heaven.”

He frowned at me.

“How do I know you’re not taking me to the *other* place?” he asked suspiciously.

“If you were meant to go to the *other* place, you’d be there by now. There would be someone totally different waiting to show you the way down. I guarantee they would not be as cordial as I am. I’m here to invite you to take the escalator up.”

“Is there really an escalator?”

“No there’s not... Look, it’s just a figure of speech Melvin. I’m here to take you to Heaven.”

He was a little shorter than me, so when he stepped closer and looked me in the eye, he had to look up.

“Are you really an angel?”

To Be Continued...